

# Gazette Chicago » Opposition stalls proposed Chinatown Special Services Tax

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By Rachel Hinton

A ghost from tax proposals past is haunting Chinatown.

Last year, the Chicago Chinatown Chamber of Commerce led a push to create a Special Service Area (SSA) in Chinatown to help beautify the area and continue to attract tourists and Chicago residents who may not live in the area.

The effort stalled, however, due to opposition from some business owners and Chinatown residents, and they continue to fight to stop an SSA implementation.

For Joanne Moy, director of the United Chinatown Organization, the taxes that come with an SSA are just another way to take money out of area residents' and business owners' pockets.

"People are getting tagged by tax after tax," Moy said, referencing Chicago's bag tax, Cook County's sweetened beverage tax, and the recent rise in the State income tax. "It gets to be really expensive, and it can be hard for people to make ends meet."

SSAs are tax districts that fund expanded services and programs through a localized property tax levy within contiguous areas.

The services and programs provided go with those currently provided through the City. Often—as is the case with Chinatown's proposed SSA—they may include more lighting, more garbage cans, decorative banners, and special events. Currently, the city has 53 active SSAs.

The Chinatown Chamber of Commerce held community meetings about the proposed SSA on July 6 and 13. Chamber members feel an SSA in Chinatown could fund a wide range of additional services and physical improvements.

"Leaders from the Chamber of Commerce in Chinatown are proposing an SSA there to help provide services desired by the community," according to a statement from the chamber. "And, those services and improvements would be determined by local representatives of Chinatown. Only the property owners that benefit from the improvements would be assessed an additional tax that is used to pay for the services."

## More support needed

Alderman Danny Solis recommended that, before approving the proposal, the chamber needed to get more support from the community.

Darryl Tom of the chamber said it has been doing that by meeting with people who have questions and oppose the SSA. Despite the opposition, Tom said Chinatown must have the service area tax.

"We believe the community needs this to be competitive with other tourist areas in the city," Tom said. "There's a lot of other places for tourists to go these days."



Photo by Christopher Valentino  
Special Services Area opponents have hung banners in Chinatown Square urging "No to SSA tax." The median first year cost per business owner will be \$380.

The proposed first year budget for the SSA is nearly \$162,000. The estimated tax rate for the first year is .31%, and the tax cap is .80%, according to data from the chamber. The median first year cost would be around \$380 a year.

Moy's organization has been educating the community and organizing at a grassroots level to make sure those who would be affected by the tax know how much it could cost them.

One of the main attractions for Chinatown visitors and local residents is the Chinatown Square Association, which is similar to a strip mall. Moy said this collection of stores would be billed three times for the same services—once by the City, once by a local association, and, should the tax district win approval, by the SSA itself.

### **Opposition banners**

SSA opponents have hung banners in Chinatown Square urging "No to SSA tax."

Currently, 263 properties would be affected, according to the chamber of commerce.

SSA opponent Daniel Ing-Hsu I. Wu, who works at Rush University Medical Center, said that around 70% of his patients work in the restaurant business, and if the SSA hurts that industry, "it will affect us all. If we want to bring business to the community, we should look at the quality of what we're offering people. The quality should be good and the atmosphere should be attractive and the cost should be low. If we raise taxes, costs go up, and that will drive people out."

Tom said the next steps are up to Alderman Solis, who has to send the proposal to the City Council committee on finance if the SSA is to move forward.

Wu said that, SSA or not, officials plan to buy more trash cans for the area and hold a mid-autumn festival to bring in more tourists and revenue. Anger over the proposed SSA is "only getting higher and higher," he said.

"This isn't going to help us," Wu said. "It's going to put more of a burden on business owners and hurt our economy, not help it. We're asking the alderman to hear the voice of the community, and I hope this will be a wake-up call for the City Council. I hope they'll listen to the majority, not a small group."

Stephen Olander, senior planner at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), which worked on Chinatown's Community Vision Plan, noted that "An SSA is something that a community has to decide on for itself. In this plan, we determined the issues and recommended strategies, but it take a lot to create an SSA."

Alderman Solis could not be reached for comment.